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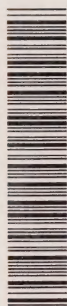
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Why an old Indian pattern was broken



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DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

By JEAN CHRETIEN

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FOR A LONG TIME now Indian people have been asking for the right to manage their own affairs in the same way as other Canadians, for equal treatment and opportunity with other Canadians. They have asked for an end to bureaucratic control of their lives, for an end to paternalism. Other Canadians have said the same things on the Indians' behalf.

Aim of policy

This is why the Government has proposed to end the federal trusteeship of Indian land, to return the land to the Indian people, to phase out the Department of Indian Affairs, to repeal the Indian Act and to work with the provincial governments to insure that Indian people are treated as full Canadian citizens by being treated as citizens of the province in which they reside.

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We as a Government were faced with a basic choice: we could keep on with the existing framework, knowing full well that this set Indian people apart and hindered their development, or we could change the existing framework to enable Indian people to be free—free to develop Indian cultures in an environment of legal, social and economic equality with other Canadians.

The Government chose to try to break the pattern of 200 years and change the existing framework. It did so knowing that the proposals would be controversial. It did so knowing that the proposals were not the solution to the so-called "Indian-problem," knowing that the only real solutions would be those which came from within the Indian community itself. It did so knowing that if it did not make these proposals and did not try to break the existing pattern it would be avoiding the basic issues.

After a year of intensive consultations and review of past policies, it became clear that the existing framework under which Indian people were governed was wrong. It was wrong because it discriminated against people on the basis of race and set them apart. It was wrong because it denied one group of citizens in this country the same freedom to manage their own affairs as other Canadians have.

There are those who say the policy is too revolutionary, that it requires too much too soon. There are those who say the Government is trying to evade its responsibilities and abandon Indian people. Others may say that Indian people need specialized help, that a policy of legal equality and independence is not enough. Some have gone so far as to say that integration is equivalent to cultural genocide. All these doubts must be set at rest through discussion and consultation, for they are the antithesis of what is being proposed.

Many will criticize but few will defend the present system. The persistent control of other people's lives is ruinous to them and futile for government. How in all con-

science can the Government pursue a policy of gradualism when it comes to giving people human dignity? What right does government have to decide for a group of people the nature and extent of their dignity? This is not something to be weighed and measured, apportioned out to those whom the Government in its wisdom has decided are deserving of it.

It seems to me that gradualism is the ultimate indignity and I am convinced that those who call our proposals precipitous now would be the first to complain if the Government continued on its past course.

The fear has been expressed that if moves are made too quickly the Indian will be separated from his land by the first sharp trader who comes along and will then become a homeless vagrant (that was how Sir John A. Macdonald put it in the House of Commons in 1872).

Long-term plan

The policy statement is clear about the transfer of control of reserve lands to the Indian people. It will take longer than five years. I made it clear that Indian people should have the opportunity to control what is theirs: the reserve lands. This is their right, but they can choose, if they want, to assume this control gradually.

The federal Government is not evading its responsibilities by calling on the provincial governments to extend their services to Indian people who live within their boundaries. This is a basic right of Canadian citizenship. The provinces are being asked, in effect, to treat Indian people as citizens, as people, not as a race apart. Where there are additional needs, they are largely regional rather than ethnic. Regional problems must be met on a regional basis and cannot be dealt with in isolation.

The present system of governing a group of people on the basis of race involves a system of "head-counting." One of the hardest problems to solve is defining who is and who is not an Indian. Many heads

have been left out in the process. The fault, of course, lies not in the heads but in the process.

This is the real problem of the Metis people. Their problems cannot be solved separately from those of their Indian neighbors. The Indian people's problems in many instances cannot be solved separately from those of their Metis neighbors. The consequence of the divided responsibility has been that neither group has had its problems solved and neither has been able to progress.

The strongest argument for provincial services was advanced in a recent issue of *The Globe and Mail* in a column by Scott Young. Although he drew quite different conclusions, the plain fact is that sooner or later Indian people do come into contact with the larger society around them. Whether this happens in a primary school-room, a high school, on the job or on a village street, the encounter comes.

The question of whether the schoolroom in which both the Indian student and the non-Indian student are classmates will be hostile or friendly ground for the Indian must lie with provincial school authorities. The federal Government can operate schools with only Indian pupils and thus defer the ultimate meeting of the two cultures. It is within the power of the provincial authorities to decide what sort of environment there will be in the schoolroom that contains both Indian and non-Indian pupils. Indian people involved in school boards will be able to make their voices heard, to insure the two cultures will come together in the best possible way.

The Canadian public and some Indian people themselves have not acknowledged the great contribution of Indian people to the richness of the Canadian mosaic. Indian people are a proud people with a great heritage. The policy statement emphasizes this important point. Government can create awareness of this strong Indian identity.

We do not feel this is incompatible with increased opportunities in a political, social and economic sense. Assimilation is a word which should be abolished from Canadian usage. Canada is a country with many different peoples; this is our strength. Canadians, however, do not have to have a separate status to have a different identity and to have a pride in their own particular cultures and traditions.

Success does not develop in a vacuum. The existence of a special department does much to create such a vacuum, to make of the Indian people a race apart, isolated from the mainstream of Canadian society.

Some people, both Indians and non-Indians, have criticized the new policy. Some have supported it. What the final outcome will be is up to the Indian people, up to the provinces and up to the Canadian public—all those who will directly or indirectly be involved in helping a new future take shape. The overriding responsibility facing the federal Government now is to try to break the patterns of the past, to explain to people why the system should be changed and to suggest how it can be changed.

No coercion

The statement is not legislation, it is not an order from above drafted in a vacuum. It was written in response to many different things which many different Canadians—both Indian and non-Indian alike and members of Parliament from both sides of the House—have said over the years. We will not push anything down anyone's throat. We will not abandon anyone or any problem. We will be flexible. We do want to discuss.

The Government believes the proposals are the right ones. It is committed to discussion, negotiating, consulting, to make them the right ones. It wants the chance to do this and it seeks the full and continuing involvement and understanding of those whose decisions will affect its chances.